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ABSTRACT

A pattern of increased homicidal violence among adolescent youth in American inner cities has been documented and studied for some time. This elevated lethal violence has been observed to be a major cause of death in this age group and has been observed to be a particularly male phenomenon, especially for ethnic minorities. Both victims and perpetrators are likely to be adolescent males. This paper examines the nature and scope of the pattern of violence among urban adolescent youth carefully and explores theoretical explanations and possible remedies. The section on theoretical explanations examines a thesis of economic deprivation, the thesis of a subculture of violence, and psychoanalytic and dysfunctional systems theses, as well as a thesis that the criminal justice system is critically flawed. The section on courses of intervention suggests prevention strategies and interventions, discusses parenting, and mentoring strategies, and considers developmental theory and research. (Contains 40 references.) (SLD)

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Presentation

Urban Adolescent Homicidal Violence: A closer look at who is at risk

by

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Presentation Abstract

The observation of a pattern of increased homicidal violence among adolescent youth in American inner cities has been documented and studied for some time. This pattern of elevated lethal violence has been observed to peak during adolescence, resulting in homicide being one of the major causes of death in this age group. The phenomenon of homicide is further observed to be a particularly male phenomenon and especially so for ethnic minority males residing in major metropolitan centers in the United States (Rose & Deskin, 1980; Dennis, 1977; Hawkins, 1986; Barrett, 1991; Rose & McClain, 1990). While it is observed that the risk of homicidal death is significant for adolescent urban youth, the finding that perpetrators are also adolescent urban youth is significant and noteworthy (Barrett, 1991; Dennis, 1990; Rose & McClain, 1990).

The reality of this pattern of homicidal violence among urban adolescent youth begs attention and more thorough analysis and conceptual study. The primary objectives of this presentation are to: (1) carefully examine the nature and scope of the pattern of lethal violence among adolescent urban youth; (2) critically examine theoretical explanations; and (3) explore possibilities of responsible courses of remediation, intervention, and implications for social policy.

Urban Adolescent Homicidal Violence: A closer look at

who is at risk

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More than half of all serious crimes in the United States (murder, rape, aggravated assault, robbery, burglary, larceny, and motor vehicle theft) are committed by youth aged 10 to 17 (Winbush, 1988). Between 1960 and 1980, juvenile crime rose twice as fast as adult crime. In northern California, children 17 and under are arrested for 57% of all felonies against people (homicide, assault, rape, etc.) and 66% of property crime (Winbush, 1988). In Chicago, one third of all murders were committed by persons aged 20 or younger - a 29% jump over 1975 (Uniform Crime Reports, 1980). A study of homicides in Los Angeles for 1988 (Barrett, 1991) found that homicide victims between the ages of 15 to 24 were at greater risk of homicidal violence than those of any other age group - especially for African Americans and Hispanic males. In addition, this study reported that nonwhite younger males were more likely to be at-risk of being both victims and perpetrators of homicidal violence.

The dramatic increase in the level of lethal violence among the younger members of society has been reflected in a consistent increase of violent crimes reported in American urban centers over the last three decades (Hawkins, 1986; Rose & McClain, 1990). The level of violent crimes attributed to younger African-Americans has significantly impacted the life expectancy for both male and female African American making felony homicide the leading cause of death for African Americans (O'Carroll & Mercy, 1986; Rose & McClain, 1990; Barrett, 1991). The significant level of elevated violence especially among nonwhite 15 to 34 years of age has given reasonable cause for homicide to be no longer viewed as a criminal justice issue but rather an urgent public health concern (Dennis, 1977; Centers for Disease Control, 1985; Hammond & Young, 1991; Barrett, 1992). A report of the National Center for Health Statistics reported the U. S. homicide rate to be 4 to 70 times the homicide rate in other countries and three-fourths of these homicides in the U. S. were committed with firearms, compared with less than one-fourth in the other countries. This report also emphasized a concern about the increase in firearm mortality among children and youth (National Center for Health Statistics, 1990).

The reality and implications of this pattern of homicidal violence among urban adolescent youth begs attention and more thorough analysis and conceptual study. The primary objectives of this presentation are to: (1) carefully examine the nature and scope of the pattern of lethal violence among adolescent urban youth; (2) critically examine theoretical explanations, (3) examine implications for parenting and family life; and (4) explore possibilities of responsible courses of remediation, intervention, and implications for social policy.

The Nature and Scope of Adolescent Homicidal Violence:

The nature of homicidal violence in Urban America, as revealed in an extensive body of research literature (Rose & Deskins, 1980; Dennis, 1977; Rose, 1980; O'Carroll & Mercy, 1986; Barrett, 1991; Rose & McClain, 1990), is characteristically ***male dominated*** *and particularly so for nonwhite (e.i. African American and Hispanic) younger males ages 15 to 34. Evidence of a progressive pattern of African American males significantly over represented as both victims and perpetrators of homicidal violence is well documented (Rose & Deskin, 1980; Staples, 1982; Gibbs, 1988; Gary, 1981; Dennis, 1990, Rose & McClain, 1990, Barrett, 1991).*

Winbush (1988) contends that the increase of adolescent violence is not unique to males. From 1970 to 1975, the arrest rate of girls under 18 for serious crime rose 40%, versus 24% for boys during the same period. In 1975, 11% of all juveniles arrested for violent crimes were females. Some predictions suggest that at the current rate, the violence among adolescent females will approximate that of males by the mid 1990's(p. 57).

According to the National Center for Health Statistics's(1991) demographic study on the scope of lethal violence among the younger segment of American society during 1979 to 1988, reveals an alarming pattern of escalating lethal violence among children and young adults. In 1988, 77% of homicides among teen agers 15 to 19 years of age were associated with firearm use(88% among African American males); at 20 to 24 years of age 70% of homicides resulted from firearm use(81% among African American males); at 25 to 29 years of age, 68% were firearm related(75% among African American males); and at 30 to 34 years of age, 64%(70% among African American males) were caused by firearms. While the firearm mortality among children 1 to 14 years of age has been relatively stable over the past decade, for African American females 10 to 14 years of age the firearm death rate more than doubled between 1987 and 1988. According to this report this increase accounted for about 30% of the increase in the death rate for all causes for this group of children. The homicide rate associated with firearms for African American males ages 15 to 19 years of age more than doubled by 1988. In Addition for young African American males 20 to 24 years of age, the firearm homicide rate in 1988 was 1.6 times the rate for 1984. In summary in 1988 firearms accounted for 20 percent of all deaths among young people 15 to 24 years of age. Particularly among African American males 15 to 24 years of age, 44% of all deaths resulted from firearms. In 1988 there were 2.7 million African American males ages 15 to 24 in the United States; 1 out of every 1,000 or 2,700 died as a result of incidents involving firearms and acts of lethal violence(p. 5).

Theoretical Explanations of Adolescent Violence:

Winbush (1988) argues that theories of criminal behavior among youth are as varied as as those who offer them. The crimes youth commit appear to be a function of economic, political, racial, or sex role values. In this sense, attempts to articulate a comprehensive theoretical explanation of adolescent violence is difficult due to the ubiquitous and varied situational context in which those behaviors occur. However, the prevailing theoretical points of

view do offer useful insights into the nature of this pervasive and admittedly complex phenomenon.

Economic Deprivation Thesis: *Robert Merton, a conservative sociologist, has had a significant impact on the Capitalist theoretical view that crime among the youth in America is an understandable consequence of those seeking status, recognition and esteem via the acquisition of the materialism associated with success and prosperity (Merton, 1952). However, Title, Vilemez, Smith (1978) challenge the assumptions of this view in a review of 35 studies of juvenile delinquents, reporting a significant decline in the relationship between crime and social class over the past 40 years. However social class has been significantly correlated with the incidence of violent crimes. Typically poorer individuals are more likely to commit violent crimes against persons, while the more affluent are more likely to commit more white-collar crimes. Little, if any, empirical evidence supports the view that property crimes are class linked. While the Economic Theory's socioeconomic deprivation thesis is a reasonable position, the observation of violence among middle-class ethnic minority youth weakens this position. However, many researchers do attribute some significance to the role of poverty, unemployment and racism on the level of violent crimes in American society (Miller, 1938; Hawkins, 1986; Block, 1986; Gibbs, 1988; Winbush, 1988; Rose & McClain, 1990; Barrett, 1992).*

Sub-culture of Violence Thesis: *According to the sociological thesis of Wolfgang and Ferracuti (1967) the over representation of assaultive violence in African Americans may be attributable to the unique ecological dynamics of ghetto life and a sub-culture that models and sanctions violence as a way of life. However, African American scholars (Staples, 1976; Hawkins, 1986; Rose & McClain, 1990; Barrett, 1992) critical of the sub-culture of violence thesis stress the importance of viewing urban violence in the proper socio-economic and cultural context. Staples (1976) argues that African American violence is consistent with the sub-culture of violence that is a historical and traditional characteristic of the larger American society that especially characterizes its relations with ethnic minorities. Barrett (1992) suggests that the significant pattern on overt violent behavior among males may support the notion of an "American male sub-culture of violence".*

The Psychoanalytic Thesis: *According to this view the high incidence of violence among African Americans and Hispanics may be a function of "poorly developed" mechanisms for coping with the anger and rage at the situations of economic deprivation, poverty, and discrimination (Fanon, 1967, 1968; Grier & Cobb, 1968; Poussaint, 1983). The psychoanalytic thesis also includes consideration of the socialization process in producing "socialized criminals" who are likely to choose convenient scapegoats in their immediate environment (Gibbs, 1988). Barrett (1992) takes this view a step further in suggesting that poor nonwhite(African American and Hispanic) males who long for, yet lack, a sense for meaningful self-actualization, self-esteem, and a sense of personal effectance are more likely to experience a "loss" of self-esteem, a sense of personal effectance, and possibilities for self-actualization and understandably become enraged and violent. While this view is quite reasonable, there is little empirical evidence to support it.*

The Social-Psychological Thesis: *Criminal violent behavior among urban youth may be easy modeled, learned and sanctioned in a social context that esteems behaviors and values that adolescent youth are developmentally and typically seeking counter-culture expressions. Barrett (1991) argues that conformity and peer pressure of gangs and "posses" may play a significant role in explaining the expression of violent behavior of urban youth. The social environmental pressure and apparent attraction is visibly evident in the counter-culture of heavy metal and rap music, and other forms of self-expression, including dress that has radically changed the appearance and presentation of American urban youth. In addition the influence of alcohol and drugs play a significant role in the criminal behavior (Fitzpatrick, 1974; Rose & McClain, 1990; Bartol, 1991). Gary (1981) reported that more African American males between 15 and 30 are victims of alcohol related homicides than any other race-sex-age group. In addition 50% of the murder cases in the low income Black community in 1979 involved alcohol and drugs. Drug abuse among African American youth has increased over the past 25 years spreading from the inner cities to the suburbs and has become increasingly linked to "hard drugs"(i. e. heroin and crack cocaine) which are inextricably tied to violent street crime(New York Times, 1987). Alcohol and drugs are associated with the three major causes of death among African American males (i. e. homicide, suicide, and accidental deaths)as it lowers inhibitions, increases feelings of frustration and resulting aggression, and situational risk of acquisition, use and sales are highly correlated with the increasing incidence of lethal violence.*

The Dysfunctional Systems Thesis: *A growing body of evidence suggest youth at risk of murder are products of family and educational systems that have failed them and increases their victimization to neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and critical educational skill deficits (Kessler Burgess, & Douglass, 1988; Busch, Zagar, Hughes, Arbit, Bussell, 1990). In a study of a sample of 1,956 delinquent adolescents, Bush and colleagues (1990) found that adolescents who kill have a tetrad of symptoms including criminally violent family members, gang membership, severe educational difficulties, and alcohol/drug abuse. Kessler, Burgess and Douglass (1988) documented a similar pattern of formative events for youth at risk of violence.*

The Critically Flawed Criminal Justice System Thesis: *According to this view the lack of consistency and fairness in the treatment of young adolescent nonwhite felony offenders has cheapened the value of life for nonwhites (Hawkins, 1986; Water, 1990; Wright, 1991; Barrett, 1992). It is apparent that even the young can see the inconsistency in valuing the life and welfare of Whites more than nonwhites, consequently increasing the probability of victimizing members of one's own reference group. Barrett (1991) reported a significant pattern of* ***intra-racial homicide*** *rather than* ***inter-racial homicide****. Similar findings of increasing rates of African Americans and Hispanics killing members of their own communities (Hawkins, 1986; Rose & McClain, 1988, Gibbs, 1988). In addition, the inability of the criminal justice system to adequately rehabilitate youth offenders increases the risk of these youth returning to society more skilled and enraged to repeat the pattern of violence. In a 1945 Philadelphia cohort study, both race and social class differences were reported by Wolfgang, Figilio, Sellin (1972) in the decision to arrest juvenile offenders being processed in the juvenile justice system. In addition, they reported that whether a youth was a one-time offender or a recidivist, he was more likely*

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to be arrested if he were nonwhite. Gibbs (1988) reports a similar disproportionate rate of arrest for African-American male youth, placement in detention centers, and their commitment to public juvenile correctional facilities. A national survey of juvenile facilities shows that African American youth under the age of 18 account for approximately 135 of the total in U. S. jails, although they account for only 10% of the U. S. population in that age group. As of February 1, 1988 more than 30% of the residents of public and private juvenile custody facilities were African American (Flowers, 1988).

Implications for Parenting and Social Interventions:

The nature and scope of lethal violence among children, youth and young adults in the U. S. suggests a need for a national agenda focused on reducing the level of violence as we approach the year 2000. The consequences for public health, social and environmental welfare, for society as a whole, can not be ignored and the costs in term of human tragedies and fiscal investments within an over burdened and flawed criminal justice system is awesome.

Prevention Strategies & Interventions: *Programs to work with youth to prevent their entry into the criminal justice system is a worthy agenda. Successful models for rehabilitation and remediation are rare. However a number of model programs nation wide are emerging, emphasizing primary prevention and outreach to urban adolescent youth building self-esteem and a sense of social responsibility. Exploratory work in teaching youth how to resolve interpersonal conflict in a nonviolent manner is crucial (Hammond & Young, 1991). Equally important is a need for teaching nonwhite males lethal confrontation skills when interfacing with peace officers and police who are more likely to exercise lethal force when interacting with nonwhite males, especially urban adolescents.*

Parenting & Mentoring Strategies: *With the growing pressures that often render families dysfunctional and inadequate to meet the developmental and emotional needs of young children and youth, there is a critical need for innovative strategies to assist families and youth. The magnitude of the problem requires a national priority to assist families and to establish programs for youth including recreational, employment opportunities, educational skills enhancement, and community mentoring. A number of experimental programs are emerging, often emphasizing cultural enrichment in male focused school programs.*

Developmental theory & research: *A growing body of evidence suggests African American males are at greater risk of mental health problems associated with coping impairments and related criminal violence (Gary, 1981; Rose & McClain, 1990). More research on the unique developmental stages, issues and concerns for nonwhite urban adolescent youth is critical to understanding the incidence of lethal violence characteristic of this demographic group (Weaver & Gary, 1990). A number of institutions and agencies have recently targeted the Black male as a worthy entity of study for social intervention. More Refinement of research, theory and approaches for clinical intervention are urgently needed.*

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Our abstract.

TITLE_Urban Adolescent Homicidal Violence: A Closer Look at Who Is At Risk.
DESC_*Adolescents; *Homicide; *Violence; *At Risk Persons; *Urban Youth; Males; Minority Groups; Ethnic Groups
ABST_The observation of a pattern of increased homicidal violence among adolescent youth in American inner cities has been documented and studied for some time. This pattern of elevated lethal violence has been observed to peak during adolescents, resulting in homicide being one of the major causes of death in this age group. The phenomenon of homicide is further observed to be a particularly male phenomenon and especially so for ethnic minority males residing in major metropolitan centers in the United States. While it is observed that the risk of homicidal death is significant for adolescent urban youth, the finding that perpetrators are also adolescent urban youth is significant and noteworthy. The reality of this pattern of homicidal violence among urban adolescent youth begs attention and more thorough analysis and conceptual study. This paper was written to carefully examine the nature and scope of the pattern of lethal violence among adolescent urban youth; to critically examine theoretical explanations for this pattern; and to explore possibilities of responsible courses of remediation, intervention, and implications for social policy. The section on theoretical explanations examines the economic deprivation thesis, subculture of violence thesis, psychoanalytic thesis, social-psychological thesis, dysfunctional systems thesis, and the critically flawed criminal justice system thesis. The section on courses of intervention suggests prevention strategies and interventions, discusses parenting and mentoring strategies, and considers developmental theory and research. (Author/NB)